



STATE SENATOR NAN RICH  
LEGISLATIVE UPDATE  
JANUARY 2011

### **MY NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHALLENGES FACED BY DISABLED PEOPLE**

I have always seen myself as an advocate on behalf of people with disabilities – serving on the Health & Human Services Appropriations Committee throughout my time in the legislature, trying to ensure that resources and services are available to some of our most vulnerable Floridians.

But until recently, I never personally experienced what it was like to be disabled or handicapped. That all changed in one moment, on December 8<sup>th</sup> in Tallahassee. I fell down a flight of stairs and badly broke my foot. My injury was severe enough to require complex surgery to repair the damage. During the five-hour operation, an orthopedic surgeon pieced my foot back together with numerous pins, plates and other assorted hardware that I'm sure will make my future airline travel a nightmare.

I am thankful now to be out of the hospital and back at home, but it will be several months before I am completely recovered. For the next three months, I am not allowed to place any weight on my left foot. I will also need extensive physical therapy to return the full usage of my foot. It wouldn't seem that a broken foot could have such an impact on everyday life, but almost immediately, I began to realize how much had changed.

The first thing I realized was how difficult it is to live in the home that is not built to accommodate someone with a handicap. When I first arrived at home, I was in a wheelchair, and immediately had difficulty getting over the front step and into my house. Luckily, my 17-year-old grandson was there to help me in my wheelchair over our front step. Since then, a temporary ramp has been installed, so I am able to get in and out the front door.

Even something as simple as taking a shower became a major undertaking. The shower in my own bathroom simply could not be made handicapped-accessible. Ultimately, my husband and son found a way to make another bathroom accessible, to make this most basic daily task possible for me.

As one of my friends said, “You’re learning the meaning of ADL – Activities of Daily Living.” And slowly but surely, I am learning to accomplish those simple daily activities we so often take for granted – although it takes much longer than it did before my injury. With the use of a wheelchair, a walker and a roll-about (similar to a scooter), I am able to get around the house. Of course, I am also fortunate that even though I live in a two-story house, most of the main living areas are on the ground floor – which is something I’d never even given a thought to, before this injury happened.

The one thing I cannot get used to, though, is how dependent I feel on my family, my friends and even my legislative staff. While I know they are happy to help me, I have seen how my injury impacted the lives of everyone around me, and I am grateful for their love and support.

This experience has truly been an enlightening one for me, and I think it would be an effective addition to the curricula of those professions whose graduates work with the handicapped or disabled, such as medical students, social workers, nurses and others, to include time experiencing what it is like to live your daily life from the perspective of a handicapped person. Having to face the challenges of disabilities first-hand would certainly make these caregivers more compassionate for the people they treat.

I know this experience will remain with me, as I return to my duties as a legislator – although I also recognize that my physical limitations are only temporary, while most people with disabilities face a lifetime of challenges. But as I continue my work as an advocate for adequate public funding for services for people with disabilities, I will do so with a more profound understanding of the difficulties they face and a deeper understanding of the moral imperative we all have to make those difficulties just a little easier to bear.

As always, I appreciate the opportunity to serve as your State Senator, and I welcome your comments and questions on any issue related to Florida government. Please feel free to contact my office at (954) 747-7933 or email at [rich.nan.web@flsenate.gov](mailto:rich.nan.web@flsenate.gov).